

Interview with William B. Schwartz Jr.

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR WILLIAM B. SCHWARTZ, JR.

Interviewed by: Donald C. Leidel

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[Note: This transcript was not edited by Ambassador Schwartz]

Q: This is Don Leidel interviewing Ambassador William B. Schwartz, Jr., on April 22, 1995, at Longboat Key, Sarasota, Florida. Ambassador Schwartz was the U.S. Ambassador to the Bahamas from 1977 to 1981. Could you begin, Ambassador Schwartz, by giving us a bit of your personal background and indicating how you came to be appointed Ambassador?

SCHWARTZ: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1921, and spent my life there. I went to public high school there and attended the University of North Carolina. Following that, in 1942, I entered the United States Navy during World War II and served until 1946, at which time I returned to Atlanta and went into business for a company called National Service Industries. Today, this company is known as the New York Stock Exchange company. I spent my major business career with them, until 1968, when due to some severe health problems I took early retirement.

I had been interested in affairs in Atlanta and in our state and got to know President Carter when he was running for Governor of Georgia. I became interested in him and devoted some time and effort to helping him when he was running for the governorship. Later,

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when he made the decision to bid for the Presidency of the United States, the first meeting that was ever held (he actually was still in the governorship) to raise some seed money for him was held in my backyard in Atlanta, Georgia. We had a handful of people who were surprised to hear Carter say he was running for the Presidency. At that time, he had been appointed to the Democratic Committee for Reelection (or something of that name). He was traveling around the country helping other Democrats in their reelection campaigns. We raised some seed money for him to do some traveling in his exploration for the Presidency.

In any event, I did help him when he ran for the Presidency, and — I laugh about it — when people ask me how I happened to be appointed, I tell them President Carter was looking for the best man he could find, so he called on me to go to the Bahamas. Of course, my association with him and with people close to him obviously influenced my being asked to go to the Bahamas. But I was totally surprised. I hadn't asked for it, didn't expect it, didn't want anything, frankly. In April of 1977, after he was already in the White House, I was at our winter home in Longboat Key when I got a telephone call from the White House and President Carter asked me to accept the Ambassadorship to the Bahamas. This came as a total, complete surprise. But I did; that's the story of how I was appointed.

Q: That was in April of 1977...and when did you go to the Bahamas?

SCHWARTZ: Well, that's interesting. If I may deviate for a moment, the Bahamas had had an interim ambassador who had been appointed under the previous Administration. He had left the Bahamas. I guess it was back in December of 1976. When I was appointed, there was no ambassador there. The deputy chief of mission was acting as ambassador. I was asked to go in April, but my confirmation didn't take place until September. So the Bahamas was actually without an ambassador until I went there in October of 1977. The best I can recall without my notes, we went there on October the eighth of 1977.

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Q: The confirmation was probably delayed by the summer recess, I would guess.

SCHWARTZ: Yes, that was it. The confirmation was delayed by the summer recess. I am told there wasn't any problem with my personal credentials.

Q: What did you do between April and October? Did you spend time in the State Department, in briefings and taking courses?

SCHWARTZ: Ambassador Leidel, I was very fortunate. I did go to Washington on several occasions at the request of the State Department for some briefings. But I suppose the most fortunate thing that happened was that the present Prime Minister, Peng Li, had had a previously scheduled personal appointment and meeting with President Carter. It was scheduled for possibly July or August of 1977. He was going to Washington to meet with President Carter, and the President asked me to be on hand for that meeting. So I actually had an opportunity to meet Prime Minister Peng Li and his Foreign Minister in Washington prior to my actual confirmation as ambassador.

Q: Did you go through a series of briefings through the Department?

SCHWARTZ: I did. I had several briefings with the Department. I actually had a two-day seminar with several other pending ambassadors to learn some of the ropes of what they expected of ambassadors. Mrs. Schwartz went with me on that occasion, and she spent a few hours getting some briefings.

Q: Were you satisfied, generally, with your preparation?

SCHWARTZ: A number of years after the fact, I have to say to you, and I don't mean this at all by way of criticism, that frankly there was a good deal lacking as far as information concerning what to expect and about personal record-keeping. But that's all been changed since then, I am told, on the recommendation of several people who went through and had some experiences where they felt the State Department might possibly give better

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information. I don't mean that as criticism, because my understanding is that today they do an excellent job. But we didn't get much specific information as to the kinds of things we could look forward to.

Q: Could you summarize, when you arrived in the Bahamas in October, what you considered to be the major issues, the crux of what you recall as being significant in terms of U.S. relations with the Bahamas, in terms of your role, your relationship with the leadership in the Bahamas?

SCHWARTZ: Well, this is 1995, and I went to the Bahamas in 1977. So, that's 18 years, and I'm 73 years old, and I'm trusting to memory. Suffice it to say that the Bahamas was not a critical country as far as relations with the United States was concerned. It wasn't the Middle East, and we didn't have any major problems, thank goodness.

The Bahamas, though geographically close to the United States, is a foreign country. The Bahamas had been left without a U.S. ambassador, as I mentioned earlier, for almost a year. The government of the Bahamas was a Black government who had come into power several years prior to that and were proud, as they had a right to be. They were anxious to stand on their own, but at the same time be recognized by the United States as a foreign government due the same attention and respect as any other government.

I found my reception to be an extremely cordial one. I think, to a great extent, that was spearheaded by the fact that I was able to meet with Prime Minister Peng Li and his Foreign Minister and the Bahamian Ambassador to the United States prior to my going there.

The drug problem was an intense one for the United States. The Bahamas was a gateway for drugs. I suppose one of the major things that our government was interested in was attempting to decrease the flow of drugs through the Bahamas into the United States. The Bahamians were interested in seeing tourism, which is their major industry, continue, and

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were interested in promoting that and in seeing the United States recognize that and help in any way possible.

We didn't have any major critical issues at the time that I went there. I arrived in the Bahamas October eighth or ninth and had the good fortune of meeting Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip four or five days after that on an official visit of theirs. I was thrown into that. Fortunately, I had already presented my credentials to the Governor General, and that was the takeoff for my experience in the Bahamas. It was a wonderful experience. The Queen was there for several days, and she also came a year or two later for the celebration of the Bahamians' Bicentennial. But that was the kick-off.

Q: Would you characterize the relations between the Bahamian Government and the U.S. Government as positive and cooperative? Were there problem areas?

SCHWARTZ: No, they really were positive and cooperative. There was some reluctance on the part of the Bahamian Government to being told by the United States that it wanted this done or that done. This was true in the drug enforcement area. When I first went there, we had no DEA office. An agent from Miami who would come over periodically. It was during my tour of duty there that we established a DEA office, which took some doing and convincing. The Bahamians didn't want the United States imposing upon them restrictions and requirements without not only their consent, but almost without Bahamian participation in it. They didn't want to be taken for granted. But the relationship between the two governments has been excellent, and I think remains so.

Q: Are there any other areas that you would care to comment on in terms of relations with the host government or its leaders or personalities that you recall that would be of special significance?

SCHWARTZ: You may recall that Vesco was in the Bahamas for quite some period of time. He was Persona Non Grata in the United States. He was there while I was there. The Shah of Iran was also there while I was there. Both of these situations required some

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hand-holding and some soft gloves with the Bahamian Government. But there were no major incidents involving either person. We didn't have any major crisis while I was there. I joke about it and tell people that I kept us out of war during the period I was there. But we had cordial relations and it was, obviously, a fabulous experience for me.

The Bahamian people respect the United States, and yet they want the United States to understand that they are a country unto themselves, that their proximity to the United States doesn't mean that they are part of the United States.

Q: Ambassador Schwartz, would you care to comment on the Embassy staff supporting you, in terms of their own qualifications, cooperation, whether they were State Department or DEA? Did you feel that you had adequate support? Were there any special problems? Also, how did you feel morale was at the Embassy?

SCHWARTZ: Well, first of all, I would say this. You know there's been a tremendous amount of conversation over the years, and there still is, about career ambassadors versus non-career, pros and cons, the attitude of the career Foreign Service personnel toward non-career ambassadors. I must say that the staff in the Bahamas was extremely cooperative. I found them well qualified and happy. The Bahamas was a lovely spot to be. It wasn't all sun and roses, but at the same time for many of the staff who had come from other locations, it was quite a wonderful change. The staff was fine, and the reception of the staff was fine.

The DCM who was there when I arrived, Rush Taylor, couldn't have been of more help to me. He was due to leave shortly after I arrived. When he left, Terry Shankle became my DCM. Terry recently passed away, but he was, just prior to his death, head of the Foreign Service Association. That shows the respect with which he was held by his peers.

The staff was fine. The Bahamian staff was excellent. I really don't have any complaints at all. We did have a very large Customs contingency, because we have a pre-clearance unit

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in Nassau and also in Freeport. Consequently, the Customs people had a large staff. They were good. I didn't have any complaints at all.

Coming out of a business environment, sometimes I did feel our Government was a little "fat," so to speak, in how the accounts were done, personnel-wise. It's a little difficult oftentimes, to get answers from the State Department in Washington. I suppose that's to be expected.

Q: Do you recall roughly how many people were in the Embassy, both Americans and Foreign Nationals?

SCHWARTZ: I think we had somewhere in the area of 28 or 30 when I went there, not including the pre-clearance unit of Customs, which was a large contingent. That did not include the Marine contingent, either. It's since grown, I am told. I've been back to the Bahamas on many occasions, and I did at one point keep in pretty good contact with them. I understand the staff has grown considerably.

Q: Did you have any Congressional visitors while you were there? Was there any special Congressional interest in the aspect of relations with the Bahamas?

SCHWARTZ: We had a couple of Congressional groups come in. We had helped the Bahamians with an agricultural experiment at Andros Island, one of the outer islands. We had a couple of groups come in who were interested in that. Senator Claiborne Pell used to visit the Bahamas with a little regularity because he had some family who were there. And we had several others, but there were no major situations that I can remember. I know we had a number of visitors, but I don't think they were on official business.

Q: Any special relation of interest with U.S. press there?

SCHWARTZ: Of course, the media was always interested in the Vesco situation and the Shah situation.

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Q: Ambassador Schwartz, could you summarize what you consider your greatest accomplishments, frustrations, disappointments during your tenure?

SCHWARTZ: Well, I suppose one of my greatest accomplishments was establishing a DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) office in the Bahamas, and the results that were obtained from it. You may recall that drugs and addiction, the flow of drugs into the United States, was a tremendous problem then. It still is today, but it was even worse then. The Bahamas was the launching pad for the entry of drugs into this country, because of the many outer islands that the Bahamas have which make it so easy for small planes to land on and transfer contraband to boats that could come on into the coast of Florida. Through the cooperation of the Bahamian Government, and through our own efforts, the DEA Office was finally obtained, and it really did a great job in stemming the flow of drugs. That was a great accomplishment.

I might comment that after the Carter Administration left, the Reagan Administration, through its Vice President at that time, George Bush , the DEA office in our Embassy in the Bahamas, was made much larger. President Reagan gave Vice President Bush the responsibility, you may recall, of handling the drug problem, and he did a great job with it.

Another thing that was done, frankly, was to mend the relationship between our Government and the Bahamian Government. Although there weren't any severe problems when I went there in October 1977, the Bahamian Government had been without an American Ambassador for over a year. They felt like second-class citizens. When they finally did get an ambassador, and I was able to have a very close, personal relationship with the top people in the Bahamian Government, I think that created a far better atmosphere, which led us to get the cooperation of the Bahamian Government in the DEA situation and also in some other problems. The fact that the Shah of Iran was allowed to go to the Bahamas was a result of our Government being able to call upon the Bahamian

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Government. We had to help find a haven for the Shah and his party, and as a result of our good relations with the Government of the Bahamas, we were able to do so.

Frustrations and disappointments were minimal. I suppose the greatest frustration was, coming out of a business environment, for me to have to go through the bureaucracy of our State Department to get results, get things done and to get answers to questions that in my judgment took longer to accomplish than it should have. That's our system. I'm not critical of it, but it was frustrating.

Q: Anything else you care to add, Ambassador Schwartz?

SCHWARTZ: I don't think so. It obviously was a tremendous personal satisfaction for me to be able to serve our country. Even though the Bahamian Government is not a crisis situation, we do have an ongoing relationship with them. They are an important partner of ours; they are close to this country; they represent an extremely critical area. We maintain military activities and bases in the Bahamas. I considered it an honor and a privilege to serve, and I appreciate what our Foreign Service does for our country far more today than I did before. I admire the career people. They are self-sacrificing and they do us a lot of credit. It was an honor for me and Mrs. Schwartz to be there.

Q: Thank you very much, Ambassador Schwartz.

End of interview